

Some Experiences of Lord Syfret

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AN OGRE IN TWEEDS

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CHAPTER I.

I WAS visiting my friend Lord Townricarde. He has a pretty place on the Fife coast, where I had long promised to spend a few weeks with him. One of his girls was a god-child of mine, and some trouble had arisen about a love affair.

Temple of the Guards had been for two years dancing attendance on her, buffeted during those years between the Scylla of her smiles and the Charybdis of her discontent. She would not take another man, yet would she not take him. "The deuce is in the girl," her father wrote. "For Heaven's sake come and preach sense to her. Temple's a first-rate chap in every way, and, as I tell her, I can't spare her more than a few thousands. She seems to think she can pick and choose as though she were an heiress. And she isn't a beauty either. She has the unfortunate O'Brien nose."

I knew the O'Brien nose. Lady Townricarde had been an O'Brien. I sighed remembering it. I glanced toward a crayon drawing over my mantelpiece. What a nose I had once thought it, with its delicate tip-tiltedness. Scorn, laughter, roguery, tears, it limned according to the angle whereunto the mood of its possessor lifted or depressed it.

And her widower called it the "unfortunate O'Brien nose." Dear nose; small wonder that it and the impressionable sensitiveness it symbolised lay now tip-tilted in waxen immobility beneath the daisies, while its ravishing curves remain unrecorded, artists having been instructed in every other portrait than that belonging to me to give it as Roman a sweep as was compatible with likeness, in order that the Townricarde prestige might lose nothing in the Townricarde

picture-gallery. So Nancy O'Brien passes down to posterity with a half-inch bridge of dignity between her dark laughter-lurking pools of eyes.

Gladys received me in the drawing-room. Her father was right: she was not a beauty, though had I been a younger man, or one about to marry, I should not have quarrelled with her face. She smiled sedately, presenting her cheek. "It would be most illogical for you to join the league against me, sir," she said, "being as you are a crystallised old bachelor."

"Good Heavens," I protested, "if you do not wish to marry Temple, I should be the last man in the world to counsel your doing so."

She put her hand through my arm. "Thank you," she said gratefully. "I do not wish to marry anybody. Perhaps when I do—if I ever do," she added whimsically, "perhaps Colonel Temple might be the man."

Temple came next morning. I had asked that he should be present during part at least of my stay. I had not seen them together. But after the confession she had made I imagined things would arrange themselves satisfactorily. I drove with Townricarde to the station to meet him. He had always seemed to me a man of whom a woman might be fond, but in these matters women, to quote a Scottish friend of mine, are exceeding "kittle-cattle." Perhaps he struck me as being especially personable that morning by contrast with another friend of my host's, who came in by the same train, a man against whom I conceived a strong aversion the moment I set eyes on him. Since the preponderance of women relieved the other sex of the obligation to woo, masculine beauty has

so far declined that we have ceased to look for it, but this man exceeded the limits of average ugliness and bordered upon the absolutely repulsive. He was immense in height and girth and massive of muscle, facts which gave a certain aggressiveness to his ill-looks.

"My friend, Major Yeo," Townricarde introduced him, leaving us to walk together while he went ahead with Temple.

Depend on it, Temple will be all right, I reflected, my eye on his soldierly stride and handsome proportions. Gladys has hesitated! Knowing her father it occurred to me that Yeo had possibly been invited in the capacity of foil, though in relation with Temple a man many degrees less prepossessing would have served. Then I forgot his ugliness hearing him talk. He was a brilliant conversationist, flashing a keen and caustic humour over all topics, giving one almost the impression that his big brain was surfaced with a fine steel polish.

The men had travelled by the night train, and on reaching the house went straight to their rooms for a wash and change.

In the meantime I repaired to the verandah, taking with me an evening paper one of them had brought. On the verandah I found Gladys and a younger sister, their pretty heads together over a book.

"O, don't interrupt us," they cried in a breathless couplet, "we are right in the midst of the loveliest murder. He is just seizing hold of her by her lovely golden hair."

"Thank Heaven, then I can read my paper undisturbed while he cuts her lovely lily throat, and the hero or some other equally guiltless person gets arrested for his pains," I retorted, and retired to an opposite corner.

There were interesting items in my *St. James's* and I was soon engrossed. Then, suddenly, I heard a laugh—a quick sharp ripple—as suddenly caught in a girl's throat. I looked up.

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated. Yeo was standing like some giant apparition in the centre of the verandah staring straight before him over the moorland. Facing me, their eyes on him, the girls sat, in attitudes of startled astonishment, the murder-book clutched spasmodically in a hand of each. The cheeks of Gladys as I looked crimsoned over

with painful shame—for the laughter had been hers.

It was a mortifying situation. But I myself could scarcely keep my gravity in view of Yeo.

He had changed to a blue serge suit of the jauntiest, flimsiest cut. About his huge middle a narrow belt of stuff was buttoned—sorely against its will, for the serge had stretched to a mere rag with the strain of meeting. On his big heavy-brained head was set askew a white straw hat, a sailor hat many sizes too small for him and bound with a blue ribbon. His nether garments stopping short at the knees revealed an unparalleled pair of calves and ankles encircled with yellow-ringed worsted stockings. The man was grotesque, absurd! Small wonder that the girl—snatched suddenly from her absorption in blood-curdling crime to this vision of buffoonery—had been betrayed into laughter.

The thing in itself was a comedy. But the horrible mortification of the Major's face transformed it straightway into something more like tragedy.

I started forward, meaning to cover embarrassment by speech, but before I could reach him he had passed rapidly down the steps and disappeared in the garden.

Gladys let her book fall to the ground. She hid her flushed face in her hands. "O, I am so ashamed," she cried. "I am ready to die of shame. How could I have done such a horrible, vulgar thing!"

But Effie assumed a different standpoint. She had kept her countenance before, but now broke into a laugh. "It served him right," she insisted. "He should not have made himself so ridiculous. Did you see that funny little girdle round his waist? And his dear ridiculous little hat stuck on one side of his dear little head?"

"Hush, hush," Gladys admonished her. "He may be coming back. O, what a horrible thing to happen. I was lost in the book, and suddenly looked up."

"Who is he?" queried Effie.

"Major Yeo, a friend of your father's," I told her.

"Why didn't father dress him properly?" she cried indignantly. "He had no right to bring such an object here, without preparing us. I wonder he didn't come in tights and spangles, but I suppose he is reserving those for dinner."



"SUDDENLY I HEARD A LAUGH"

"He is a very clever man," I excused him. "You will not find him ridiculous when you know him."

But Effie had no ears for reason. "Good gracious!" she bubbled over. "Do you think he has a wardrobe of surprises like that? It will be rather

entertaining, you know. I shall go and look through his things in advance, and warn you what he intends wearing, so that we may not be taken again at a disadvantage. Why don't you laugh, Gladys?"

But Gladys had no more laughter in her.

CHAPTER II.

It has been said that no good woman understands dress. The term "good woman" needs to be defined before the proposition can be stated. If Mrs. Grundy herself—as she leads me to suspect—be the only member of her sex embraced by that definition—or by anything or anybody else—then is the proposition demonstrated. Mrs. Grundy is lamentably lacking in the science of clothes. However this may be, I have certainly known men otherwise unpugnable who have been a signal discredit to the art of tailoring.

Yeo was one of these. Though I never after saw him in that suit—which he straightway discarded—I have rarely seen him decently dressed, save in the evening when custom left him no alternative. Otherwise his choice of clothes was little less than criminal, or if Mrs. Grundy's bonnet may be fitted to his sex, something more than saintly! For pattern he indulged in checks of chess-board dimension or stripes of zebra-like exaggeration. For colour his weakness was such that he had no heart to prefer one before another, but chose stuffs amalgamating all. It has annoyed me many a time since to remember that I might have added to my stock of curious information the name of Yeo's tailor, whereas I am still in ignorance as to whence such grotesques may be obtained. The poor man, I believe, was striving to divert attention from his unfortunate appearance by that which he conceived to be a unique and elaborate taste in dress.

I was present in the drawing-room when Townricarde introduced him to the girls. He had changed into a Harris tweed, wherein his large unwieldy bulk lost nothing of size or unwieldiness, but stopped short of being ludicrous.

"We have already met," he insisted with a bitter meaning in his voice, bowing to Gladys.

Her face crimsoned. Her looks dropped guiltily before his fierce mortification.

I saw Temple glance from the one to the other in surprise. "I thought you had not met my girls," Townricarde said.

But Effie broke in sedately: "Major Yeo only means that he flitted like a vision across the verandah when Gladys and I were laughing over a comical book."

Yeo presented her with a blood-red volume. "I picked it up as I came back into the house," he said punctiliously, adding with emphasis: "From the title and a superficial inspection, one would not suspect it of being humorous."

"One should not judge by externals," Effie retorted.

"It is a maxim I have reason to uphold," was his caustic rejoinder.

Gladys flushed guiltily again. She lifted her eyes to his with a sudden pleading abasement. His glance rested on her face with interest. He swept her fine figure and charming looks. He was curiously heavy-lidded. That and a certain torpid cruelty of expression set me thinking of a snake.

"Poor Yeo certainly can't be called a beauty," Temple responded to my remarks, "but he seems to be a good fellow." This is what Temple himself was essentially, and as I have noticed in other men of that sort, by virtue of the quality, he imagined most of his acquaintance to possess it.

For my part it was the last qualification I should have applied to Yeo. Eminently capable, rapid-witted and virile, I should assuredly have admitted him as being, but not the other thing.

"Can't help being sorry for him," Temple continued. "He's so morbidly sensitive about his looks. Some girl treated him badly—threw him over for a handsome chap—he was awfully hard hit. I am told he has never been the same since."

"His parents ought certainly to be ashamed of themselves," I said. "If they in collaboration had perpetrated a book

or a picture of the calibre of this son of theirs, they would have been locked up."

Temple smiled.

"I am perfectly serious," I insisted.

He smiled again. "That is what gives your jokes such point, sir," he said.

After a pause—"Poor Gladys was quite cut up when I told her about it——" he resumed.

"O, you told Gladys."

"Yes, I thought she would have cried.

She has such a heart, Gladys has. She said it was the most pathetic thing she had heard. I never knew her to use strong language before, but she insisted that the girl who treated him so badly ought to have been hanged, or something of that sort. Dear girl!" He puffed at his cigar.

"That was the reason she was so nice to him all last evening. Quite pretty to see her talking to him, wasn't it?"

"O, quite," I said. After reflection I inquired: "How long is he stopping?"

"Yeo? O, I don't know. He seems to be enjoying himself."

"And you?"

"I always enjoy myself here," he said hopefully.

Gladys had not to all appearance exhausted her indignation against the fickle breaker of Yeo's heart, or it may be her sympathy with him, for she continued to be what Temple termed "so nice" to him to the exclusion of Temple himself.

"I can't think how he managed the thing," the Colonel confided to me, "although he's such a clever chap. To beat Gladys by four holes up, and she such a ripping player and he only learning—it's amazing."

I had seen the method of it, having walked round with them, so that the victory did not appear so amazing to me.

"You dare say a word," she had menaced me after sending only a few yards a ball she was capable of driving some hundreds. "Major Yeo is so sensitive," she had added diffidently, "it disheartens him to lose."

I glanced at his burly frame striding some paces in advance. "He scarcely looks a subject for cotton-wool wrappings," I demurred.

"Perhaps you think that because he



"HE SCARCELY LOOKS A SUBJECT FOR COTTON-WOOL WRAPPINGS"

is not very good-looking he has no heart," she observed with a little defiant air, that reminded me of her mother. "He has a very sad story—very, very sad," she said, glancing after him.

I watched her through the game, till the end, when her mistaken quixotism reached its climax; seeing the balm of victory soothe his excoriated vanity. I began to watch her closely and with some misgiving. Heavens! what will-o'-the-wisp fatuity fermented in her brain?

The man had some power over her.

She grew to flush and tremble at his approach. She lost her bright manner and speech. She seemed for ever afraid of hurting him, for ever entreating pardon for her offence against him. Her remorse for that offence was a weak spot in her armour, her passion to make amends a lever whereby he moved her, and of these he did not scruple to make use. Day by day he further dominated her, day by day she resisted less. The snake-like impression I had of him was strengthened. He consciously and intentionally magnetised her. He was fond of her, I suppose, after a fashion, but it was a fashion, for the most part cruelty. Townricarde in his opinionated way scoffed at my fears. He did not hesitate to characterise them unflatteringly.

"No girl," he insisted, "would care for an ugly brute like Yeo. Why you yourself told me she laughed at him."

I had not suggested that she cared. There were fear and aversion in her face when he approached her, but there were pity also and appeal and dangerous surrender.

Temple saw it, and grew perplexed. "Why is Gladys so much with that brute?" he once observed. "He has a shocking record. Her father had no right to bring him here."

"Can't you rid us of him, somehow?" I urged.

He looked up apprehensively. "Good God, you are not afraid——" he broke out. "She couldn't care for a brute like that."

Certainly it seemed incredible. Yeo stayed on. Townricarde was as pig-headed as he was obtuse, and the man cajoled him and deceived him with all his rare powers of deceit and cajollery.

Things came to a climax at the end of three weeks. Yeo's and Temple's visits were to terminate next day. I had begun to hope. I was confident that, once removed from the dominant spell of his personality and the pitfall of her innocent offence against him, she would see him in all his repulsiveness—for he grew no less repulsive on further acquaintance.

He and she had repaired after breakfast to the library. Thither I followed them. I was determined not to give him an opportunity of a farewell *tête-à-tête*.

As I entered he levelled one swift

insolent look at me, but taking a book I withdrew to the further end of the room.

They had been chatting some time, when suddenly he dropped his voice, and his words, which before I had failed to hear, now reached me. "I have only loved two women," he was saying, his heavy-lidded eyes on her face. "One of them to whom I was engaged jilted me for another man, because of my ugliness. The second," he spoke slowly and impressively, "ridiculed me openly for the same reason."

He paused. She had broken into a sobbing cry, as though he had struck her. She stretched a trembling hand out. "She ought to have been whipped," I heard her falter, "but she did not know you."

"Know me," he echoed bitterly. "That makes little difference to a woman. Your sex, Miss Haldane, prefers a straight-nosed, pink-skinned doll before a man of brains and character who has the misfortune to be plain. Do not trouble to inform me that I have not the conformation of an ogre. God knows! I have reason enough to be aware of it."

I could not hear her answer, but I heard her tones, compassionate, impulsive, healing. The room was long, and one judging from appearances would not have supposed that, at the distance they sat from me, their words would have been audible. But the ceiling was dome-shaped, and the hollow caught and amplified their voices, bringing the conversation to me with harsh distinctness. I had no scruple in listening. The man was dangerous, corrupt. It is a supererogation of punctiliousness to wash hands before closing with a sooty foe.

"I do not contend to virtue, either," he continued with a kind of purring rasp in his voice. "My face in the glass is enough to nip any wretch's morning aspirations. I have been consistent. I am as bad as I look. I am candid with you, you see. You cannot expect a broken-nosed person like me to walk straight," he ended with a horrid laugh.

She started up. She put out a hand as one blind feeling her way. "O, I cannot bear it," she cried. "Somebody must help you. Somebody should be with you to show you how mistaken you are, how little your appearance would matter to one who cared for you."

He was silent. They seemed to have

forgotten me. I sat apparently lost in my book, in reality observing them from beneath its lower edge. His low-lidded eyes swept her face. A flash of triumph passed over his uncouth features. But he put a strong control upon himself. He shook his head hopelessly. "It might have been," he said. "It is too late now. I have lived too long with my own hideousness to have any self-respect or ideals left. Once——"

She faltered toward him. She drew back. Then she faltered again toward him. She put a hand on his arm. "It is never too late," she insisted. "And I do not believe what you say. If you were not ever so much more good than bad, you would not feel so bitterly any wrong you may have done. It is cruel — O, it is cruel——"

He finished the sentence for her. "For a man to be so plain," he said bitterly.

She looked into his face. "Yes," she said simply, "for a man so clever and strong and—sensitive as you."

A rage of candour or an indecency of revelation seized him. "If I am what I look," he burst out with his repulsive laugh, "if all my brutality of face is only the expression of brutality of nature, if I have indulged in the worst vices, if I am capable of the vilest crimes—my face leading me——"

There was no faltering in her now. Her face was irradiate, her step firm. She rose and moved swiftly to him. She laid her two hands on his shoulders, and stood so, looking up into his odious face. "If I could help you?" she said.

"How could you help me?" he cried harshly.

I thought for the first time there was compunction in his voice.

"I could help you," she said firmly. "I admire your intellect and your strength. I am very, very sorry—I could make you respect yourself for all the power and cleverness there are in you. I could——" she suppressed a little shuddering cry, "perhaps I could love you," she faltered.

He stood looking down upon her



"SHE STARTED UP"

bowed head, that white heat of triumph in his face. He had possibly some affection for her. It was not all vanity that stirred him. He put an arm about her. With a cry she tore herself away. She stood at a distance from him, holding out a hand of avoidance. "O, I do not love you—yet," she cried breathlessly.

He broke into a scoffing laugh. "No.

nor ever will," he retorted, turning violently on his heel.

She hesitated one moment. Then she followed and caught up with him before he reached the door. She laid an arm about his throat, she laid her cheek against his shoulder.

"I will, I do," she said gently. "You shall never again go alone through life

with—with only your poor ugliness." He was about to kiss her, when I coughed. I walked down the room to where they stood, together. "Really, Major Yeo!" I said with undisguised disfavour.

"Really, Lord Syfret!" he retorted, with admirable insolence, adding with a bow and a laugh, "One might suppose you feel somewhat *de trop*."

CHAPTER III.

Now whether Yeo loved her after that fashion of his which was more than two-thirds cruelty, or whether it was merely a sop to his galled vanity to carry a siege which Temple, famous for fine looks, fine character, and fine possessions, had vainly attempted two whole years, I cannot say.

I thought the Colonel would have blown his brains out when he knew. "She could never marry him. Good Heavens! how can a girl like her marry him?" he raved. "He is as big a brute as he looks."

"What could I do," Gladys pleaded to me. "I laughed at him. I wounded him. You heard me laugh."

"Pooh," I insisted, "an accident, a trifling error. Are you to sacrifice your life to such an indiscretion?"

"Everything is against him," she insisted. "I can help him. I can save him from himself. He will throw away his life——"

"He is bad, and a cad," I urged, "or he would never have used his ugliness and vices to compel you as he has done. And why should you pity him rather than Temple?"

She broke out crying. "It is fate," she wailed. "O, it is no good talking. I cannot help myself."

"Take Temple," I said. "He will only be too happy to help you."

"No, no," she sobbed, "he is handsome, and fortunate, and good—he has no need of me."

"No need, poor wretch; hasn't he shown his need faithfully and sufficiently these two years?" The two men were at this moment approaching from opposite sides of the garden. I saw her eyes glance from one to the other. The fear I had before seen passed into her face as she turned from Temple's fine personality to the hideousness of his rival. Before they had reached the verandah, she had fled.

Though things had gone so far, I believe she might even then have been saved had Townricarde not acted like a fool.

"For goodness' sake," I enjoined him, "go carefully, or you will fling her irrevocably into the brute's arms."

But nothing gives a man so much self-confidence as does his own pig-headedness. "My dear Syfret," he returned complacently, "Yeo leaves to-morrow, and I shall forbid her to see him again."

Next morning after breakfast I was summoned to the library. Outside the door, her fingers trembling about the handle, Gladys stood.

"It has come," she faltered, "and I cannot help myself, it is fate—it is fate!"

I took her hand, and together we went in.

Townricarde stood at one end of the hearthrug, gesticulating violently. At the other end, self-possessed, resolute and towering above him stood Yeo. "Your daughter shall speak for herself," he was saying, as we entered: "I will take no other answer."

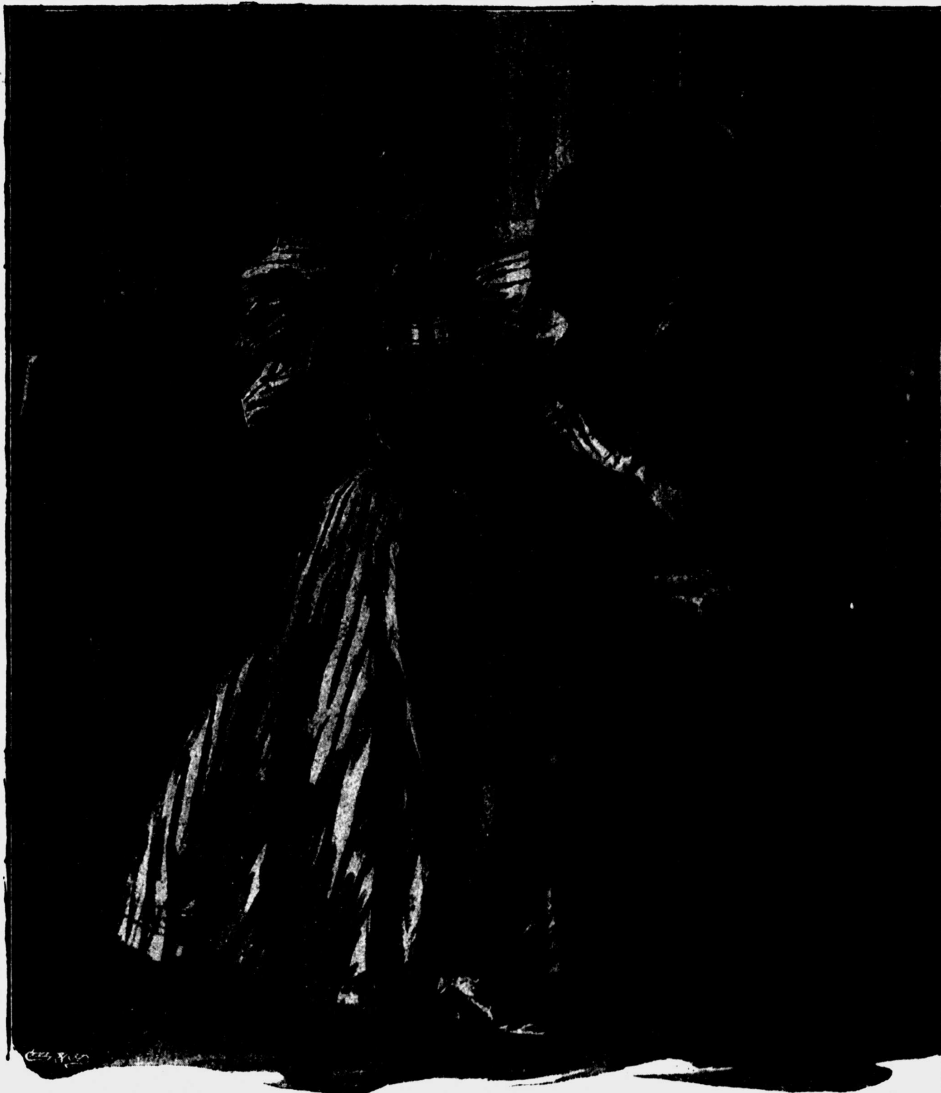
"Speak for yourself, Gladys," her father insisted. "Send this man away. He has the insolence to tell me you have chosen him—a person you have known less than three weeks—for husband."

The Major folded his arms across his chest, and stood in a Napoleonic attitude, gloomy, deserted, forbearing. I could have kicked him for his tragic airs. I saw her look toward him helplessly. I saw the fear and weakness in her face.

"It is unfair," I protested. "We must give her time. Major Yeo will not take advantage of a girl's impulse——"

"She shall speak now or never," her father thundered. "Major Yeo leaves for London by the mid-day train."

The Major bowed. He took out his watch and consulted it. "That gives a clear hour for her—having already



"CAUGHT HIM UP BEFORE HE REACHED THE DOOR"

pledged herself—to speak," he said, adding brutally, "and for me to pack."

Ninety-nine women out of a hundred have a fibre which responds to savagery. It is a remnant of the squaw, the echo of an age wherein nature, making for physical fitness, fashioned woman in such wise that she should choose her mate in the red-handed victor. Gladys was the hundredth woman, however, and she distinguished between savagery and strength. She recoiled from the coarseness of his attitude and speech. She looked him unwaveringly in the face. It was a moment of advantage.

But Townricarde lost it by intemperate

action. He cast by his control, and starting forward shook a powerless fist in Yeo's face.

"You are a scoundrel, sir," he cried.

Yeo remained calm and dignified. "You take advantage of my position as your guest and of your daughter's presence to insult me," he submitted with admirable self-control.

Before I could prevent him, Townricarde crossed the room, and had rung the bell. "Major Yeo is leaving by the half-past one train," he said when the butler appeared. "See that the dog-cart is round."

The man swept our faces with a shrewd

respectful glance. "Will Major Yeo take lunch, my lord?"

"No," his lordship thundered.

"Father," Gladys put in, in a low voice, "you forget you have not invited Major Yeo."

"I have not asked him to lunch here, because I do not mean that he shall," her father burst out violently.

The butler closed the door respectfully behind him. The Major stood a minute. Then he turned, bowed, and walked down the room. I confess I was sorry for him at that moment, well as we were rid of him. It was a moment to humiliate the most audacious.

However, he was a man whose misfortunes stood him in good stead. As he went, mute, erect and dignified, he stumbled suddenly against a footstool and, tripping, fell headlong. He was quickly on his feet again, but in rising turned on us such a face of rage, mortifi-

cation and pitiful ugliness that Gladys with a low cry ran down the room to him. She put a detaining hand on his arm. She turned her face and streaming eyes.

"Father," she cried, "if you send Major Yeo away, I shall go with him."

* * * *

They had not been married three months before her heart was broken. In less than twelve she had suffered an inordinately bitter punishment for that unwitting laugh of hers, had learned the lesson that the reclamation of a brute is no such light achievement, and further, that one pays in this round hollow world of ours more grievously for sins of judgment than one does for cold-blooded crimes. However, in that time she had carried these flint-stone facts, her broken heart, and a little dead, ugly-faced baby with her to the grave.

FIRST LOVE

OUTSIDE my open door this misty dawn,
While throstles pipe upon the budding bough
And dewdrops glisten on the greening lawn,
I wait the coming of my darling now.

The sweet old garden, wet with April showers,
The daisied, pearly path across the grass,
Flanked by the golden dandelion flowers,
Await the coming of my own dear lass.

Listen! the clear click of the rising latch!
Soon shall I feel upon my lips her kiss;
The pairing swallows twitter 'neath the thatch . . .
Ah, God! there never was a spring like this!

THOMAS MCEWEN.